

# Jerusalem Perspective

Exploring the Jewish Background to the Life and Words of Jesus



Magen Broshi **The Wealth of Herod the Great**

David Bivin **The Miraculous Catch**

Marvin R. Wilson **Jewish Laws of Purity in Jesus' Day**



*I am writing to tell you how very much I have enjoyed reading your series entitled "Hebrew Nuggets." Naturally, as a rabbi and lifetime student of Hebrew, the material is hardly strange to me. Nevertheless, I enjoy your methodology and splendid manner of presentation.*

*Arthur D. Kahn, Rabbi Emeritus  
Congregation B'nai Emunah  
Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.*

*Can you help solve a puzzle? In Luke 17 and Matthew 24 Jesus makes the oddest statement: "Where the body is there also will the vultures be gathered"; "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Lk. 17:37; Mt. 24:28, NASB). This seems so out of sync with the subject matter. Could Jesus have used a Hebrew idiom of the day that we misunderstand (looking through English via Greek eyes, as it were)? Please shed some light on this phrase.*

*Beth Dodd, Gainesville, Texas, U.S.A.*

### David Bivin responds:

Luke 17:37b and its parallel in Matthew 24:28, "Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together" (King James Version), is certainly one of the most enig-

matic of Jesus' sayings. Commentators have noted that Jesus employed a proverbial saying to reply to his disciples' question, however they differ about what the proverb means in this context. Some understand it to mean that the Son of Man will inevitably appear just as eagles will inevitably show up where there is carrion. Others suggest that it refers to the swiftness with which the Son of Man will come in judgment. Still others take it to mean that the Son of Man will come when the world has become like a lifeless corpse, rotten with evil, and is ripe for judgment. None of these interpretations seems satisfactory in light of the disciples' terse question — "Where?"

Part of the Jerusalem School's methodology is to translate sayings of Jesus into Hebrew and then ask what the Hebrew means. When this saying is put into Hebrew one immediately sees an allusion to a passage from the book of Job which describes the habits of vultures: "It [the vulture] dwells among the rocks and there it lodges; its station is a crevice in the rock; from there it searches for food, keenly scanning the distance, that its brood may be gorged with blood; and where the slain are, there the vulture is" (Job 39:28-30, *New English Bible*). This passage concludes with

*(continued on page 18)*

**Cover photo:**  
Waves of the  
windtossed Sea of  
Galilee climb the  
ancient walls of  
Tiberias and throw  
themselves across  
a Greek Orthodox  
monastery building  
atop the walls. This  
extraordinary photo-  
graph, taken by  
Mendel Nun during  
the easterly that  
struck the Galilee  
on March 11, 1992,  
demonstrates the  
tremendous force  
of such wind-  
storms. Raging  
waves like these  
were once stilled  
by Jesus (Lk. 8:24).

## Jerusalem Perspective

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**Publisher** David Bivin

**Editor** Jeffrey Magnuson

**Senior Writer** David Pileggi

**Design** David Bivin

**Design Consultants** Yael Avi-Yonah Goldfarb, Richard Sears

**Artwork** Liz McLeod

**Contributing Editors**

David Flusser, Robert L. Lindsey, Shmuel Safrai, Randall J. Butch,

R. Steven Notley, Mendel Nun, Waverly Nunnally, Ray Pritz, Halvor Ronning, Marvin R. Wilson

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P.O. Box 31820  
91317 Jerusalem  
Israel

# The Wealth of Herod the Great

King Herod built on a scale that surpassed even the rulers of the Roman empire. Magen Broshi explains how this administrative genius was able to fund monumental building projects both within and without his kingdom.

by Magen Broshi

And as he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what magnificent stones and what magnificent buildings!" (Mark 13:1)

**H**erod the Great's gigantic building projects, both public and private, required enormous financial resources. His riches were so vast that he could spend an incredible fortune not only on buildings in his own domain, but also on showy structures abroad.

We know of at least twenty of his projects in the land of Israel, the size of which set world records at the time. Among them were the Temple complex, built on a vast artificial esplanade or platform that was the largest of its kind in antiquity;<sup>1</sup> the Royal Portico of the Temple, the longest building then in existence;<sup>2</sup> Herodium,

then the largest palace in the world (only Nero built a larger one in Rome, some sixty years after Herod's death);<sup>3</sup> the harbor of Caesarea, the most technologically advanced harbor in antiquity;<sup>4</sup> the citadels and palace in Jerusalem; the citadel and palaces at Masada; the palace complex at Jericho; the cities of Samaria, Caesarea, Gaba-Hippeon and Antipatris; and the irrigation systems in the Jordan Valley. Josephus tells of dozens of cities abroad that enjoyed Herod's munificence for luxury buildings and contributions for building a fleet.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that Herod oppressed his subjects and extracted heavy taxes to fund such extensive and extravagant building projects — to say nothing of the expense of maintaining a strong army at home and an opulent court life. The direct tax on agricultural produce reached one quarter to



Since 1965 archaeologist Magen Broshi has been curator of the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book, repository of the major Dead Sea scrolls.



The platform for the temple constructed by King Herod can still be discerned in this aerial view from the north. The two structures which today dominate this area are the golden Dome of the Rock (center) and the Al Aksa mosque (at the southern end of the esplanade). (Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)



*Monumental ashlars that formed the base of the Herodian Temple platform are visible in this photograph taken in 1968 shortly after the Temple Mount excavations began. These ashlars are located in the lower part of the west retaining wall of Haram es-Sharif, the Arabic name for the Temple area, near its southwest corner. Jutting from the wall (above the man) is the spring of a gigantic arch known as Robinson's Arch.*

*(Photo: JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE)*

one third on cereals and one half on fruit, and this was only one of the taxes collected. There were also indirect taxes, fixed taxes and temporary taxes — euphemistically called “gifts.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly the country experienced unprecedented prosperity under Herod, and he was able to lay hold of considerable surpluses. His sources of revenue included agriculture, exports, transit trade and, of no small importance, the Temple.

### Agriculture

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the country witnessed extensive agricultural development. Farmers planted new crops, cultivated almost all arable land and used almost all available water for irrigation. Close to 65–70% of the land north of the Negev<sup>7</sup> may have been cultivated,<sup>8</sup> compared to about 40% today.<sup>9</sup> Terracing in the mountainous areas — a huge enterprise that began in 1200–1000 B.C.E. — was continued so that those areas could be intensively cultivated. In the Jerusalem corridor, for instance, some 56% of the land was terraced and tilled.<sup>10</sup>

Although the irrigated areas in the land of Israel were generally a very small portion of the overall cultivated land, Herod had notable irrigation projects in Jericho, the Golan and the Hauran.<sup>11</sup> Thus the

maximum use of natural resources, along with agricultural innovations, contributed considerable taxes to Herod’s available wealth.

### Exports

Very little was exported from the land of Israel in antiquity, only modest quantities of agricultural products such as grain and oil. The single significant export item must have been balsam,<sup>12</sup> because the oases of Jericho and Ein-Gedi, and probably also across the Jordan River in the Plain of Moab, were the only places in the Roman Empire in which the balsam tree grew. Ancient authors elaborate on the Jericho balsam, both coveted and expensive. Pliny wrote that in the days of Alexander the Great the price of balsam was twice that of silver (*Natural History* 12:117). Following the suppression of the Jewish Revolt in 70 C.E., Titus and Vespasian displayed the rare balsam trees among the booty in their victory procession in Rome.

The dye extracted from the henna shrub was another important export item.<sup>13</sup> Women have used it from antiquity to paint their fingernails and color their hair, and sometimes to dye textiles.

### Transit Trade

Commerce in incense, herbs and spices was extremely important in the Herodian period. The land of Israel was the intermediary for trade to the Mediterranean world from southern Arabia and places as far away as India and Ceylon. These items were very expensive in relation to their weight, and the Roman world consumed vast amounts of them. Among the most widely used were frankincense and myrrh, vital ingredients in religious practices, and also used in medicines and cosmetics.<sup>14</sup>

Transportation costs were the most important factor in determining the final price of the goods. According to Pliny, the cost of a camel-load sent from Arabia to Gaza reached up to 668 denarii (*Natural History* 32:65).<sup>15</sup> The lion’s share of the expenses on that long road, said to comprise some sixty-five caravan stops, must have been tolls, duties and protection costs, and Herod’s treasury undoubtedly profited from part of these fees. Herod’s kingdom eventually included the most important trade routes: the Negev road to the Mediterranean and the road across Transjordan to Damascus — the biblical “King’s Highway.”

## The Temple

Pilgrimage was a major factor in the economy of the land of Israel in general and of Jerusalem in particular, although we have no way of estimating the number of pilgrims. Relevant data provided by Josephus and the Talmud are quite legendary and not very useful.

There is no doubt, however, that myriads of pilgrims came to Jerusalem, both from the country itself and from the Diaspora — from Babylon to Rome, and from northern Greece to southern Yemen.<sup>16</sup> They brought with them considerable sums of money for donations to the Temple, for purchasing animals for sacrifice in the Temple, and for living expenses while in Jerusalem. Jewish law prohibited charging pilgrims money for lodging, but they could pay with the hides of the sacrificial animals. The pilgrims undoubtedly brought with them not only cash to cover expenses, but also merchandise which they could sell or barter. This would have made Jerusalem an important commercial center.

Many sources from the period, both Jewish and non-Jewish, speak of the donations and sacrifices brought from the Diaspora to the Temple, and above all of the half-shekel tax. The origin of the half-shekel tax, required of every Jewish adult male, goes back to the time of the building of the tabernacle in the desert (Ex. 30:11–16), and to a similar tax of one third of a shekel set in the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 10:32–33).<sup>17</sup> In the Hasmonean period the half-shekel duty became institutionalized as an annual tax, unlike the desert tribute which had been a one-time contribution.

At the beginning of the first century B.C.E., this tax was raised regularly in the Diaspora and in the land of Israel. We know of several cases in which foreign rulers made it difficult to transfer such monies or even confiscated them,<sup>18</sup> and one of the most important privileges given to Jews under Julius Caesar and Augustus was the right to transfer money to Jerusalem without hindrance. Augustus even classified it as sacred money so that whoever meddled

with it was subject to capital punishment (Josephus, *Antiq.* 14:215; 16:163ff.).

In this period the shekel was identified by Jews with the tetradrachma, a silver coin of four drachmas, equal to four Roman denarii. Thus the half-shekel tax was two drachmas, or two denarii, worth approximately two days' wages. The payment — and this in a world replete with monetary standards and exchange rates — had to be made in Tyrian currency. That necessitated money-changers like those whose tables Jesus overturned in the Temple. Ya'akov Meshorer has shown that after 19 B.C.E., when Tyre ceased to mint its own coins, all the Tyrian coins were produced in

Jerusalem, most probably by the Temple authorities and possibly by Herod himself.<sup>19</sup>

Minting these coins in Jerusalem must also have accounted for a significant amount of income for the local economy. While a number of ancient chroniclers place the number of Jews at the time of Herod at some seven or eight million, that is probably an exaggerated number. We might conservatively estimate two million,

with half a million living in the land and one and a half million in the Diaspora. If we estimate the number who paid the half-shekel tax as one third of Diaspora Jewry, this tax would have brought in about one million drachmas (denarii) of revenue annually. Even based on this minimalist computation, the half-shekel tax must have accounted for 10–15% of the public budget.

These large sums apparently made a great impact on economic life in the development of trade and industry in Jerusalem, and on local employment. According to the Mishnah, the revenue from the half-shekel tax was used for expenses of the Temple and the city in general. It could be spent on "the upkeep of the aqueduct, the city wall and its towers and all the needs of the city" (Mishnah, *Shekalim* 4:2). Such public works projects boosted the economy, putting into circulation large amounts of money which Herod could tax.

In addition to the half-shekel dues, the Temple and the priests and Levites who



*A Tyrian half shekel (didrachma) minted in 39/40 C.E.  
(Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem)*



*Two women look at drawings based on the new information provided by the Temple Mount excavations, which at that time (April, 1968) had been in progress for only a few weeks. Behind the women is the southwest corner of the massive Herodian Temple Mount platform. They are standing on newly exposed paving stones of the Herodian street that ran along the south wall of the platform.*

*(Photo: JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE)*

served in it received donations and gifts, some discretionary and some obligatory, which must have amounted to very large sums. Both as a focus of pilgrimage and a recipient of dues and donations, the Temple played a most important part in the country's economy. Adding to this the regular sources of income from agriculture, exports and transit trade, we can see how Herod was able to finance his grand designs. **JP**

1. Cf. J. Simons, *Jerusalem in the Old Testament* (Leiden, 1952), pp. 346ff.

2. The length of the portico was 270 meters. Cf. R. Grafman, "Herod's Foot and Robinson's Arch," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970), 60–66; B. Mazar, "The Royal Stoa in the Southern Part of the Temple Mount," in *Recent Archaeology in the Land of Israel*, ed. H. Shanks and B. Mazar (Washington, D.C. and Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 141–147.

3. E. Netzer, "Greater Herodium," *Qedem* 13 (1981), 110.

4. A. Raban and R.L. Hohlfelder, "The Ancient Harbors of Caesarea Maritima," *Archaeology*

40 (1971), 24–26; M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 197–200.

13. Zohary, p. 190.

14. G.W. Van Beek, "Frankincense and Myrrh," *Biblical Archaeologist* 23 (1960), 69–95; J.I. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 BC–AD 641* (Oxford, 1969).

15. One denarius was roughly equivalent to a day's wage.

16. S. Safrai, "The Temple," in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Assen-Amsterdam, 1976), 2:598ff. On estimates of the number of pilgrims, 2:901–902.

17. J. Liver, "The Half Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1983), 173–198.

18. See Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28:66–69.

19. Y. Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage* (Dix Hills, New York, 1982), 2:7–9; idem, "One Hundred Years of Tyrian Shekels," in *Studies in Honor of Leo Mildenberg* (Wetteren, 1984), pp. 171–179.

*Condensed and adapted from the author's "The Role of the Temple in the Herodian Economy," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38.1 (Spring 1987), 1–37.*

34.2 (1981), 56–60.

5. On Herod's gifts to cities abroad, cf. *War* 1:422–425; *Antiquities* 16:146–149.

6. On taxation under Herod, cf. A. Schalit, *König Herodes* (Berlin, 1969), pp. 262–298.

7. The Negev is a strip of land in the south of Israel with Beersheba as its center. Its northern border is approximately twenty-five kilometers north of Beersheba.

8. A. Reifenberg, *The Soils of Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1938), pp. 131ff.

9. The area cultivated in Israel in 1980 was 4,270 square kilometers. This constitutes some forty percent of the land north of the Negev. Cf. *Statistical Abstracts of Israel* 32 (1981), 376.

10. Z. Ron, "Agricultural Terraces in the Judean Mountains," *Israel Exploration Journal* 16 (1966), 33–49, 111–122.

11. According to Josephus, the size of the irrigated area at Jericho was 70 x 20 stadia, or 4,800 hectares (*War* 4:467).

12. Cf. S. Lieberman, "A Preliminary Remark to the Inscription of En-Gedi," *Tarbiz*

# The Miraculous Catch

## Reflections on the Research of Mendel Nun

In 1989-90 JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE presented a series of articles written by Galilee fisherman and scholar Mendel Nun. David Bivin shares his appreciation of Nun's research, and shows its importance in understanding the story of the miraculous catch of fish recorded in Luke 5:1-11.

by David Bivin

**S**ince Jesus spent so much time on or near the Sea of Galilee and his disciples were Sea of Galilee fishermen, Mendel Nun's research is important in illuminating many Gospel stories.\* His comprehensive knowledge of ancient fishing on the Sea of Galilee has allowed him to determine the exact time and place of the beginning of Jesus' ministry with disciples: winter on the lake shore at Heptapegon near Capernaum.

Nun also has shown that in the story of the miraculous catch Peter could only have been using a trammel net or a veranda net, a variation of the trammel net. He could not

have been fishing with a seine because it was not used near Heptapegon/Capernaum. The floor of the lake in that area of the coast is so rocky that the seine would have continually gotten hung up on the rocks. And it is unlikely that Peter was using a cast-net because he was fishing with boat and crew.

According to Nun, fishermen using a trammel net fished at night and stopped their work at dawn because in the light of day the fish could see the netting. Before the fishermen turned in for the day, they carefully washed their nets and hung them to dry. If the linen nets were not dried promptly after use they would rot in a short time. From the Gospel account of the



*David Bivin, a member of the Jerusalem School, has lived and studied in Israel for twenty-nine years.*



*March 11, 1992: An easterly pounds the promenade of the city of Tiberias. This windstorm, the worst in living memory, caused millions of shekels of damage to the lake's western shore and the rest of Galilee. According to Nun, it was an east wind such as this that Jesus rebuked.*  
*(Photo: Mendel Nun)*



*Mendel Nun in the 1950s fishing for sardines with a purse seine along the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee near Kursi (Gergesa).*

*Now seventy-four years old and no longer working as a fisherman, Nun still has the toughened look which comes from years of fishing.*  
(Photo: Margarot Dickinson)

miraculous catch we learn that Jesus arrived at the lakeshore while the fishermen were still washing their nets, and immediately got into one of the boats and began to teach. If, as Nun says, the washing of the trammel nets took place shortly after dawn, then Jesus must have begun teaching very early in the morning. Nun's research makes this text come alive with realistic detail.

Jewish sources support this picture of the diligence and faithfulness of teachers in Israel during this period, and the people's eagerness to learn Torah. From rabbinic literature one learns that the sages taught in every conceivable venue and at any time of the day or night. Here we have an example of a sage teaching in the early morning, perhaps as early as 7:00, from a boat moored offshore. A crowd large enough to cause Jesus to use a boat as a teaching platform had gathered, despite the early hour.

### Tough Work

Was it just by chance that Jesus chose fishermen as disciples, or had their difficult work especially prepared them for the task for which they were chosen? The Sea of Galilee fishermen were tough. Their bodies were wet much of the time, nor were they spared this rigor even in the winter for it is during the winter when fishing is at its best on the Sea of Galilee: the musht (St. Peter's fish) season is in the winter, as is the sardine season. The winter is also the rainy season in Israel, and it often rained on the fishermen during those long winter nights when they were out on the lake. (In those days there were no rubberized rain gear like today's fishermen wear!) The fisherman's work was also difficult physically, entailing rowing to and from the fishing sites, hauling in heavy nets and lifting catches of fish. Cast-net fishermen had to dive under the water repeatedly to retrieve their nets.

Most fishermen worked all night and

slept during the day. We can image that a typical fishing village like Capernaum was quiet until 12:30 or 1:00 p.m., with mothers shushing noisy children or any dog that barked.

Put yourself in Peter's place, having working all night in a small boat, in the cold, in the dark, perhaps in the rain. How would you feel if while washing your nets shortly after dawn, dead tired after a long night of fishing, someone climbed into your boat and asked you to row him out into the lake, and then you had to sit in the boat waiting for several hours while that person spoke to an audience? Before long your patience would be wearing thin because you would not only be sleepy, you would begin to be very hungry as well. Imagine then being ordered to go back to work, to let down your nets again — **after they had already been washed!** What *chutzpah* on the part of Jesus!

### Where Was Jesus?

Where was Jesus when he said to Peter, "Push out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch"? Where was Jesus when Peter fell at his feet in shock and amazement?

Our impression of the story in Luke 5:1-11 is sometimes colored by a similar story found in John 21:1-14. We often



unconsciously harmonize the Lukian and the Johannine accounts even though the story in John takes place after the resurrection. We picture Jesus standing elegantly **on the beach**, perhaps with an arm outstretched towards Peter's boat some distance offshore. We envision Peter jumping out of his boat, swimming ashore, falling on his face **on the beach** before Jesus, and then climbing back aboard his boat to drag the loaded net ashore. This is due to the influence of John's account which has Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, jumping out of his boat which was 200 cubits (about 90 meters) from land and swimming ashore.

However, in the Lukian account, Jesus is in Peter's boat when he tells Peter to push out into the deep water and begin fishing again. Jesus also is in the boat when Peter falls at his feet immediately after the loaded fish nets are hauled into the boat.

It may seem to us from English translations of this story that Peter alone maneuvered the boat into position for Jesus' teaching session, that Peter alone took his boat out to deeper water, and that Peter single-handedly let down the nets. But Jesus' command — "Push out [plural] into the deep water and let down [plural] your [plural] nets for a catch" — indicates that there was at least one other fisherman from Peter's crew who got into the boat with Peter and Jesus. Also the statement in verse 7, "they motioned to their partners in the other boat to come and help **them**," shows that Peter was not the only fisherman in the boat.

The trammel net boat was normally manned by four fishermen. It is therefore likely that there were two or three other fishermen who got into the boat along with Peter. (The trammel net boat could with some difficulty be operated by a crew of two — one crew member rowing and the other playing out and hauling in the nets.) If only two persons besides Peter and Jesus got into the boat, then perhaps Jesus served as the crew's fourth member. If three got in then Jesus was in the way, since in a boat of this size — fifteen to eighteen feet long — there was barely room for four fishermen, their nets and other equipment.

This alters the usual picture we have of Jesus' lakeside teaching session: as the crowd listened to Jesus, they saw him in a boat flanked by two to four fishermen. Furthermore, we have to picture Jesus, as the nets were being hauled into the boat,



crowded into a corner of the boat and partially covered with nets and fish — unless he had replaced the fourth crew member and was helping to pull in the nets. Had Jesus himself spent time fishing on the Sea of Galilee?

### Peter's Response

When Peter saw the enormous catch, he fell down in the boat in front of Jesus crying "Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" The text adds that Peter and those with him were astonished "at the catch of fish which they had taken." Did these fishermen react this way because statistically it was unlikely that they would catch fish, not to speak of a near-record catch, after having worked all night and caught nothing? Yes, this partially accounts for their shock. The unlikelihood of now catching enough fish to be worth their while financially is also indicated by Peter's initial response. He didn't immediately do as Jesus said, but first argued a little: "Lord, we have worked all night and caught nothing."

But there is more to these Galilean fishermen's reaction of amazement than the catch itself or its size. Until the introduction of transparent nylon nets in the mid-1950s, trammel net fishing was done only at night. In the daytime, the fish could see the nets and avoid them. The miracle was not so much that there were now large

*Mendel Nun in his office at the Kinnereth Sailing Company, Kibbutz Ein-Gev. Behind him is the wall chart on which he plots the fluctuations in the water level of the Sea of Galilee. (Photo: JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE)*

numbers of fish in an area of the lake where only a few hours before there had been none, but that the fish swam blindly into the net. In addition, in trammel net fishing the fish had to be scared into the nets after the nets had been put in place. Although possible, it does not seem from Luke's account that the fishermen made a commotion to frighten the fish.

What was it, then, that caused Peter to fall in fear at Jesus' feet? Apparently, it was a combination of things, but probably most of all it was the timing of the miracle. It was amazement at Jesus' ability to, as we say, "call the shots." Immediately after he finished preaching, when it was convenient for him, Jesus compensated these fishermen for their inconvenience.

This confidence of Jesus stands out. To teach a crowd of people Jesus apparently did not mind the inconvenience he caused these fishermen because he planned to reward them for their service and knew that he could do so whenever he wished. We see this same confidence demonstrated by Peter after Pentecost when Peter, knowing in advance what he was going to do and what would be the result, healed a lifelong cripple (Acts 3:6).

Jesus was not unaware of the tiredness of the fishermen and their frustration at not having caught anything after working so hard all night. He knew that they were dead tired and wanted to go home and go to sleep. He also knew of their general need for income and their particular lack of it

after this unsuccessful night of fishing. He removed their frustration at having wasted a night's work and blessed them with enough fish to compensate them not just for the few hours he took of their time but with as many fish as they would normally have caught in several nights of good fishing. Mendel Nun estimates the catch described in Luke 5 at about three-fourths of a ton — as much as a trammel net fishing crew would normally take in two week's work, allowing for nights like the one that Peter and his crew had just experienced when nothing is caught. **JP**

\*Articles by Mendel Nun have appeared in the following issues of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE: Sep/Oct 1989, Nov/Dec 1989, Jan/Feb 1990, and Mar/Apr 1990.

Mendel Nun's publications may be ordered from JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE: *The Sea of Galilee and Its Fishermen in the New Testament* (64 pp., 82 illustrations, \$6.00 plus postage and handling: \$2.50 by air or \$1.00 by sea); *The Sea of Galilee: Newly Discovered Harbours from New Testament Days* (31 pp., 48 illustrations, \$4.00 plus postage and handling: \$2.00 by air or \$1.00 by sea); *Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle Church & Fishing Village* (32 pp., 39 illustrations, \$4.00 plus postage and handling: \$2.00 by air or \$1.00 by sea); and *The Sea of Galilee: Water Levels, Past and Present* (24 pp., 26 illustrations, \$3.50 plus postage and handling: \$2.00 by air or \$1.00 by sea). If ordering by sea mail, allow 45-60 days for delivery.

*Size and shape of trammel net boats have remained constant since the time of Jesus. The crew is a minimum of two.*  
(Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)



# Jewish Laws of Purity in Jesus' Day

The sages were required to interpret the biblical commandments, including those dealing with ritual uncleanness of menstruants. Rabbinic regulations about impurity caused by menstruation form the background to several stories in the Gospels.

by Marvin R. Wilson

The Hebrew Scriptures and other early Jewish writings place considerable emphasis upon the laws of *נִזְבָּה* (*ni-DAH*, menstruation, menstrual flow; menstruant). The main foundational teaching on menstruation in the Hebrew Scriptures is found in Leviticus 15:19–33. In addition, the sixth division of the Mishnah, *Tohorot* (Cleannesses) contains a tractate titled *Niddah* (The Menstruant). Furthermore, the Babylonian Talmud devotes hundreds of pages to commentary on the laws of menstruation in the tractate *Niddah*, including numerous accounts of how the rabbis judged the "purity" of various stained cloths which had been presented for their examination (*Niddah* 20<sup>b</sup>).

## The Regulations

According to the Bible, a woman is impure for seven days from the beginning of her menstrual flow (Lev. 12:2, 15:19). Anyone who touches a menstrual woman becomes unclean until evening (Lev. 15:19). Whoever touches her bed or anything she sits on during the week is unclean until evening and must wash his clothes and bathe with water (vv. 20–23).

Sexual relations during a woman's period are forbidden (Lev. 18:19; Ezek. 18:6, 22:10). The penalty for the man and woman who violate this prohibition is being "cut off" from the people of Israel (Lev. 20:18). But should a woman's menses begin during intercourse, the man and woman become unclean for seven days, and her condition of uncleanness is transferred to him (Lev. 15:24).

If a woman menstruates for more than seven days, or has an irregular discharge of

blood at any time other than her period, her uncleanness ends only after seven "clean" days (Lev. 15:25ff.). On the eighth "clean" day, the final act of ritual purity involves the bringing of two doves or two young pigeons for sacrifice (15:29ff.).

The sages extended the period when sexual relations between a husband and wife are prohibited to seven "clean" days following the menstrual period. This means that the total period of separation is about twelve days a month assuming a menstrual period of five days.

## Purification

By the time of Jesus, bathing in water was an established part of the purification process following menstruation, but nowhere in the Bible is there mention of the menstruant bathing in water. Instruction on purification through the use of the *mikveh* or "ritual bath" by menstruants may be traced to the time of the sages. An entire tractate of the Mishnah, *Mikvaot*, is devoted to immersion pools. To this day, for Jewish women committed to halachah or "religious law," immersion in the *mikveh* is considered obligatory before marital relations can resume.

According to Leviticus 12:1–8, because of the bleeding associated with childbirth a woman is ceremonially unclean after giving birth just as she is unclean during her menstrual period. The uncleanness is for seven days if she bears a boy (v. 2), and for fourteen days if she bears a girl (v. 5). The mother must wait thirty-three additional days after a boy and sixty-six days after a girl to be finally "purified from her bleeding" (vv. 4–5). At the end of her time of uncleanness, she is to bring a sacrifice to



Marvin R. Wilson is the Harold J. Ockenga Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. He worked for eight years as a translator and editor of the New International Version of the Bible, and has contributed notes to the NIV Study Bible. Four of his books deal with the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

(continued on page 17)



*Shmuel Safrai is professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University. With his vast knowledge of rabbinic and secular material of the Second Temple period, he is uniquely qualified to answer many of the questions posed by readers of the Gospels. In this column he presents some of his insights into the Jewish background to the Gospels.*

# Trees of Life

Today it is the custom of Ashkenazim to equip Torah scrolls with wooden handles called "Trees of Life." It is often assumed that this also was the practice in Jesus' time. Professor Safrai explains that such was not the case.

by Shmuel Safrai

In the time of Jesus Torah scrolls were handleless. There is not one mention in all of rabbinic literature of a Torah scroll being rolled around two wooden rods with handles. Today this is the custom of Ashkenazim, who call these rods *כְּתָבָה וְשָׁמֶן* (a-TSE ha-YIM, trees of life) on the basis of

Proverbs 3:18. Sephardim encase Torah scrolls in special wooden boxes with spindles around which the ends of the scroll are wound. This case, like the handles of the "trees of life," protects the parchment of a scroll from unnecessary handling that shortens the scroll's life. When reading from the scroll, the case is opened, often being placed upright on the reading stand.



*A woman stitching the end of a new Torah scroll to attach it to a "tree of life" in a ceremony at the Central Synagogue in Tel Aviv (March, 1964). According to Jewish tradition, this ceremony is the only occasion on which women touch a Torah scroll.*

*(Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)*



*Left: An Israeli boy reading from a Torah scroll during his Bar Mitzvah ceremony which was held in the ruins of the ancient synagogue at Masada (Jan. 1967). Note the wooden scroll handles.*

*(Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)*

*Below: Columns XXXII and XXXIII, Is. 38:8-40:28, of the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIs<sup>a</sup>) written about 125-100 B.C.E. and discovered at Qumran in 1947. The stains visible on both end rolls are residue from the natural oils of the hands which held the scroll in ancient times.*

*(Courtesy of John C. Trever)*



In the time of Jesus a Torah scroll was held in one's hands, and rolled and unrolled with the hands. No handles were used to grip the scroll. Even now among Ashkenazim, the five biblical books which are read at home during the minor festivals (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther) have no handles, being read from a parchment roll as in the first century.

Second Temple period sources sometimes mention a Torah scroll being tucked away in one's bosom, that is, in one's clothing in the compartment created above the belt between the outer robe and inner undergarment. Scrolls were often carried in this convenient storage place and the sages ruled that one should not flip out the scroll from this compartment similar to the way that



today some smokers flip a pack of cigarettes out of their shirt pocket by bending forward (Tractate Soferim 2:9, addition 2, ed. Higger, p. 381), as this was considered disrespectful. A "scroll cloth" also is mentioned in Mishnah, Moed Katan 3:2. This was a piece of cloth which was inserted and rolled up in the scroll. The cloth protected the back side of the scroll from dirt and oiliness of readers' hands while also preventing contact between the written and unwritten sides of the scroll.

According to halachah one was to hold the scroll by its back side not touching the written side of the scroll (Tractate Soferim 2:10, addition 2, ed. Higger, p. 382).

A Torah scroll is depicted in the frescoes that covered the walls of the mid-third century C.E. synagogue at Dura-Europos (see above). Ezra, or Moses, is reading from an open scroll and he holds it with both hands by its two rolled ends, touching only its back side as prescribed by halachah. **JP**



*Opposite, top: Ezra, or Moses, holding an open scroll by its two rolled ends. A panel of the frescoes that covered the walls of the mid-third century C.E. synagogue at Dura-Europos, Syria. (Reproduced from *The Synagogue* by Carl H. Kraeling. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956, Plate LXXVII.)*

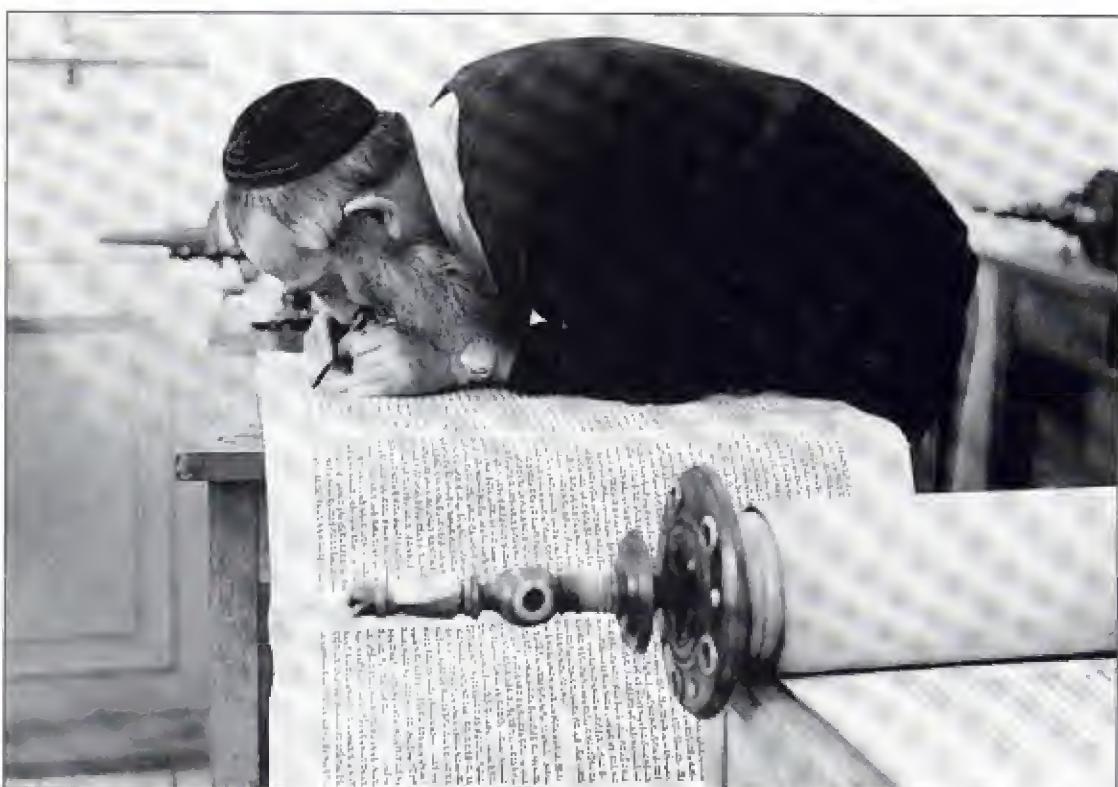
*Opposite, bottom: A Bar Mitzvah boy reads his Torah portion at the Western Wall in Jerusalem (July 1990). Note that the scroll is encased in the wooden box preferred by Sephardim. (Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)*

*Left: Interior of the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book. The Great Isaiah Scroll is centrally exhibited in a circular display case. The ingenious design of this display, which gives the impression of a scroll, has one flaw — the giant scroll handle. Apparently the architects did not realize that this element of the scroll motif was a contradiction to Jewish custom in the period from which the Dead Sea Scrolls date.*

*(Courtesy of the Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum. Photo: David Harris)*

*Below: A scribe at work in Jaffa, Israel (February 1960). Note the ornate scroll handle in the foreground.*

*(Courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office)*



# Prayers for Emergencies

One of the many results of synoptic research is the discovery of parallels between the sayings of Jesus and those of other Jewish sages. A knowledge of these parallels can provide added insight into what Jesus was teaching.

by David Bivin

**T**he prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Mt. 6:9–13; Lk. 11:2–4) is viewed by Christians as a model prayer. It is even sometimes suggested that since the Lord's Prayer can easily be prayed in about half a minute, prayers should be kept to that length. A little Jewish background provides an important perspective on the Lord's Prayer and removes the notion that all prayers should be short.

the “rock of our lives and shield of our salvation” whose “miracles are daily with us,” whose “wonders and benefits occur evening, morning and noon,” and whose “mercies and kindnesses never cease.” A person who is fluent in Hebrew can pray this prayer in about five minutes.

Every Jew is religiously obligated to pray the Eighteen Benedictions daily. Rabban Gamaliel said: “One must say the Eighteen every day” (Mishnah, Berachot 4.3). In times of emergency, however, this obligation is fulfilled by praying a shortened form of the Eighteen:

Rabbi Yehoshua says: “If one is travelling in a dangerous place, he says a short prayer, namely, ‘O Lord,

save your people the remnant of Israel; in every time of crisis may their needs not be lost sight of by you. Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers prayer.’” (Mishnah, Berachot 4.4)

## Rabbinic Parallels

### Central Prayer

The central prayer in Jewish life and liturgy is known by a number of names: **שְׁמָנָה עֲמָדָה** (*she-ma-NEH 'es-REH*, Eighteen), since it originally consisted of eighteen benedictions; **עֲמָדָה** (*a-mi-DAH*, Standing), because it is said standing; or simply **תְּפִלָּה** (*te-fi-LAH*, Prayer), the prayer *par excellence*. It is very ancient, its final version dating from around 90–100 A.D when a nineteenth benediction was added.

This prayer is the essential part of the morning, afternoon and evening weekday services in the synagogue. It is said first in a whisper by the worshipers and then recited aloud by the reader. The prayer is composed of three opening benedictions of praise which include “We will hallow your name in the world as it is hallowed in the highest heavens”; thirteen petitions including petitions for wisdom, healing, forgiveness, deliverance from want and affliction, and for the sending of the Messiah, “the branch of David”; and three concluding benedictions which include thanksgiving to

### Abbreviated Prayers

The Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 29<sup>b</sup> explains that “a dangerous place” is “a place infested with wild animals or bands of robbers” and provides additional examples of abbreviated prayers:

Rabbi Eliezer [a younger contemporary of Jesus] says: “May your will be done in heaven above, grant peace of mind to those who fear you [on earth] below, and do what seems best to you. Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers prayer.”

Note the phrases “your will be done” and “in heaven above ... [on earth] below” as in the Lord's Prayer. Also note the parallel between “grant peace of mind” in the prayer Eliezer taught and “deliver us from evil” in the Lord's Prayer.

Rabbi Yehoshua says: “Hear the supplication of your people Israel and quickly fulfill their request. Blessed are you, O

Lord, who answers prayer."

Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Zadok says: "Hear the cry of your people Israel and quickly fulfill their request. Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers prayer."

Other sages say: "The needs of your people Israel are many but they do not know how to ask for their needs. May it be your will, O Lord our God, to sustain each and every one and to supply each person what is needed. Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers prayer."

The petitions for God's provision for livelihood and his supply of what is needed are

strongly reminiscent of the request for "daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer.

The sages taught their disciples abbreviated versions of the Eighteen Benedictions such as those above, and it seems likely that Jesus similarly gave his disciples a prayer for occasions when there was not time to say the full form of the prayer. Far from being proof that customarily one should pray very brief prayers, the Lord's Prayer points us to the Eighteen. It can be assumed that in normal times Jesus and his disciples prayed daily the much longer "Eighteen." **JP**

#### **Jewish Laws of Purity in Jesus' Day** (continued from page 11)

the priest (vv. 6-8).

The synoptic Gospels record an account of Jesus coming into contact with a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8:43-48). Whatever the cause of her loss of blood, the Levitical restrictions (esp. 15:19-33) rendered her ritually unclean, and likewise anyone and anything she might touch, thus making her an exile among her own people. The moment the woman touched the cloak of Jesus, however, she was healed by the power of God, and her defilement removed. The New Testament is silent about whether the woman's actions rendered Jesus ceremonially unclean and about her obligation to bring the prescribed offerings following cessation of her discharge (cf. Lev. 15:28-30).

#### **Other Sources**

In addition to the Bible, other Jewish sources indicate Judaism developed very strong and forthright teaching concerning *ni-DAH*. For example, the Mishnah compares the uncleanness of an idol to the impurity of a menstruating woman (Shabbat 9:1). The failure to heed laws concerning menstruation was considered one of three transgressions for which women die in childbirth (Shabbat 2:6). Josephus states that women during the menstrual period were not permitted in any of the courts of the Temple (*Against Apion* 2:103-104; *War* 5:227). The social separation of

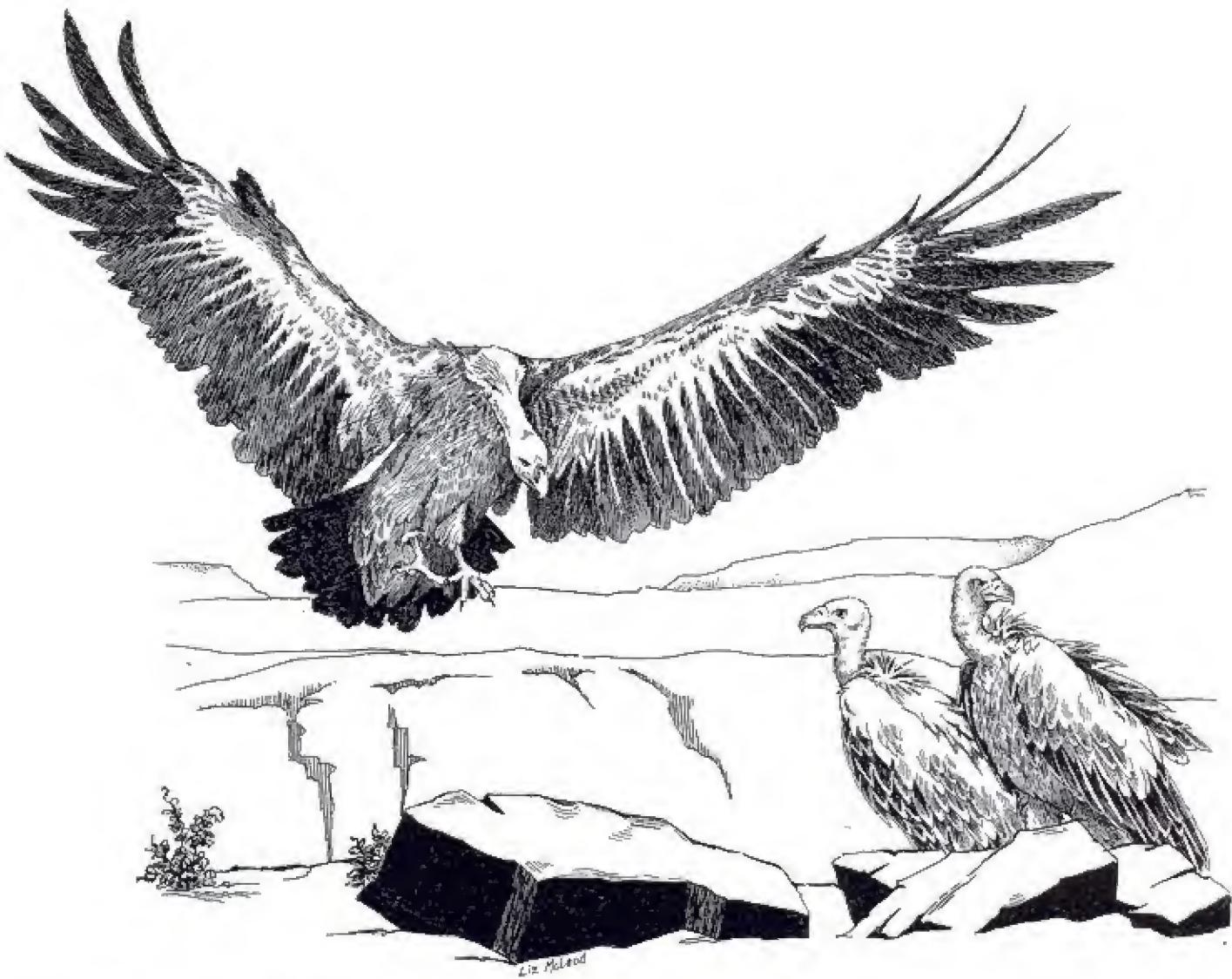
women during their menses is further emphasized in the Talmud.

The Mishnaic sages taught that women were exempt from religious ordinances whose fulfillment depended upon a certain time of the day or the year (Mishnah, Berachot 3:3; Kiddushin 1:7). Thus, the lengthy periods of seclusion mandated by their ritual uncleanness, as well as their responsibilities at home, led to a general non-participation of women in the public activities of community religious life. A woman's routine, however, could change somewhat at menopause. An "old woman," according to the Mishnah, is one who has missed three menstrual periods (Niddah 1:5). **JP**



*Rock-hewn steps descending to a mikveh (ritual immersion pool) which was discovered in 1968 during the Temple Mount excavations. The low divider built on top of the stairs enabled a ritually clean person to exit the pool by a different path and thus avoid contact with an entering unclean person.*

*(Photo: JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE)*



**Griffon vultures, the biblical "eagles."**  
(Illustration by Liz McLeod)

**Readers' Perspective**  
(continued from page 2)

the proverb to which Jesus seems to be alluding: וְאֵשֶׁר חַלְלִים שָׁמָר (u-va-va-SHER ha-la-LIM sham hu<sup>2</sup>), "and wherever there are slain, there it is." Whenever the slain lie exposed in the open field, immediately vultures appear and huddle around them.

Many English versions of the Bible, like the *King James Version*, present the reader with four literalisms in translating the eight Greek words of Luke 17:37b:

1) "body" would be more idiomatically translated by "slain" or "dead body." The singular of חַלְלִים (ha-la-LIM, slain persons), the word used in Job 39:30, is probably behind the Greek word translated "body" in Luke 17:37 and "carcass" in Matthew 24:28. In biblical Hebrew ha-la-LIM means wounded

or slain persons, never carrion or the carcasses of animals.

2) "eagles" should be translated "vultures" (eagles do not feed on carrion). The confusion arises because נְשָׁרִים (ne-sha-RIM), the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word translated "eagles" in Luke 17:37, the same Hebrew word used in the Job passage, can mean both "eagles" and "vultures."

3) "will be gathered together" should be converted to the present tense — "gather together." Hebrew proverbs use the future tense, but English proverbs use the present tense (e.g., "A stitch in time saves nine."). Future tense verbs in Hebrew proverbs must usually be changed to present tense when translated to English.

4) "the body," and "the vultures," though technically definite, have an indefinite

sense in this context and should be translated as "a [dead] body" and "vultures." In Hebrew the definite article "the" often has an indefinite sense.

A more idiomatic translation of this saying would be: "Wherever there is a slain person, there vultures gather."

Jesus seems to be speaking of the rapture. This is indicated by the use of "taken" in the preceding verses: "...there will be two men in one bed. One will be **taken** and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be **taken** and the other left" (Lk. 17:34-35). "Take" is a Hebraism for "translate, rapture," as in the case of Enoch of whom the Bible says: "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God **took** him" (Gen. 5:24).

Robert Lindsey has reached the conclusion that the setting for Jesus' saying is a meeting between Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Olives just prior to his Ascension (*Jesus Rabbi & Lord*, p. 188). Jesus told his disciples that at the rapture many people would be left behind ("one will be taken and the other left"). The disciples are concerned, and express this in just one word: **נָאָתָה** (e-FOH, where). "Where will you be, Lord? How will we reach you?" Jesus calms his disciples with a

well-known proverb: "Wherever there is a slain person, there vultures gather;" that is, "Wherever I am, there you also will be." At his appearance, the disciples instantaneously and miraculously will be found in his presence. **JP**

*JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE* welcomes the opinions of readers, and uses this column to share as many of their comments and questions as possible. *JP* reserves the right to edit readers' letters for length and clarity.

## Transliteration Key

<b>Hebrew &amp; Aramaic</b>	<b>בְּ</b> - k <b>כְּ</b> - k (like ch in the Scottish loch) <b>לְ</b> - l <b>מְ</b> - m <b>נְ</b> - n <b>סְ</b> - s <b>צְ</b> - tz (voiced guttural) <b>פְּ</b> - p <b>צְ</b> - t (like ts in nets) <b>רְ</b> - r <b>שְׁ</b> - sh <b>תְּ</b> - t	<b>אָ</b> , <b>אָתָה</b> - a (like a in father) <b>כָּ</b> - e (like e in net, or e in hey, or somewhere in between) <b>וָ</b> , <b>וָתָה</b> - e (like e in net) <b>יָ</b> , <b>יָתָה</b> - i (like i in ski) <b>וָ</b> , <b>וָתָה</b> - o (like o in bone) <b>וָ</b> , <b>וָתָה</b> - u (like u in flu) <b>אָ</b> - e (silent, or as short as e in happening, or as long as e in net)
<b>Consonants</b>	<b>בּ</b> - b (silent) <b>כּ</b> - v <b>גּ</b> - g <b>דּ</b> - d <b>הּ</b> - h (or silent) <b>וּ</b> - v <b>זּ</b> - z <b>בּ</b> - b (voiceless guttural) <b>צּ</b> - t	<b>בּ</b> - The form of the letter at the end of a word. <b>וּ</b> - a (The <b>וּ</b> is used here as a point of reference.) <b>צּ</b> - a (like a in father; rarely like o in bone)
<b>Vowels</b>	<b>אַ</b> - y (or silent)	<b>אַ</b> - ai <b>וֹ</b> - oi <b>וּ</b> - ui

### Diphthongs

**אַיִ**

**וֹיִ**

**וּיִ**

**Greek**  
Transliterations are based on the Society of Biblical Literature system.

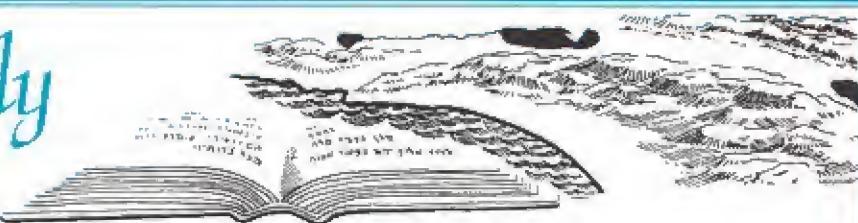
*JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE* would like to thank Lucille M. Chiles of Lancaster, California, Rodney & Cecile LeJeune of Conroe, Texas, and Dr. Ray L. & Jean Shelton of Waynesville, Ohio, whose generous donations helped make this issue possible.

# Shoresh Study Programs

Since 1986 Shoresh (Hebrew for 'root') has been helping Christians take a closer look at the Jewish origins of their faith. Our tours are not the typical Holy Land pilgrimages. Rather, we bring out the deeper meaning of the life and message of Jesus by examining his place among the Jewish people of the first century. We also take the time to investigate the rich Hebraic context of the words of Jesus.

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**All other countries:** Shoresh Tours, Box 14037, Jerusalem, Israel. Telephone: 2-733-988.

*Shoresh Study Programs* is a non-profit ministry of Christ Church, Jerusalem.

# International Synoptic Society

**T**he International Synoptic Society supports the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research by serving as a vehicle through which interested individuals can participate in the School's research.

The Society raises financial support for publication of the Jerusalem School's research, such as the *Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary*; facilitates informal discussion groups focusing on the synoptic Gospels; sponsors student research assistants and other volunteers who work with the Jerusalem School.

Annual membership in the Society is: Regular £60 or US\$100; Fellow £180 or \$300; Sponsor £300 or \$500; Patron £600 or \$1000; Lifetime membership £3000 or \$5000 and over. Membership dues can be paid in monthly or quarterly installments, and in most currencies (see box at bottom of page 2).

Members of the Society receive a beautiful certificate of membership and free subscription to **JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE**. They also are entitled to unique privileges such as pre-publication releases of *Commentary* materials including preliminary Hebrew reconstructions with English translation of stories in the conjectured biography of Jesus. Major publications of the Jerusalem School will be inscribed with Society members' names.

Checks should be made payable to "Jerusalem School" and designated "ISS." Members in the United States can receive a tax-deductible receipt by sending their dues via the Jerusalem School's U.S. affiliates: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, P.O. Box 293040, Dayton, OH 45429 (Tel. 513-434-4550); or Centre for the Study of Biblical Research, P.O. Box 5922, Pasadena, CA 91117 (Tel. 818-301-9051).

## Jerusalem School Evenings

Please contact us if your synagogue, church or organization would like to know more about the International Synoptic Society and Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research. We will be delighted to arrange a visit by one of the Jerusalem School's representatives.

The School's representative will answer questions and present an interesting program that includes the showing of a colorful video. Filmed in Israel, the video incorporates on-site interviews with members of the Jerusalem School; accompany Prof. David Flusser to the site of Caiaphas' tomb; join Dr. Robert Lindsey at the Sea of Galilee where he explains the significance of Jesus' "woes" to Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum; and more.

## The Jerusalem School

**T**he Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research (מכון ירושלמי לחקירת האותנוגליות והсинופטיות) is a consortium of Jewish and Christian scholars who are examining the synoptic Gospels within the context of the language and culture in which Jesus lived. Their work confirms that Jesus was a Jewish sage who taught in Hebrew and used uniquely rabbinic teaching methods.

The Jerusalem School scholars believe the first narrative of Jesus' life was written in Hebrew, and that much of it can be recovered from the Greek texts of the synoptic Gospels. The School's central objective is to reconstruct as much as possible of that conjectured Hebrew narrative. This is an attempt to recover a lost Jewish document from the Second Temple period, a Hebrew

scroll which, like so much Jewish literature of the period, has been preserved only in Greek.

As a means to its objective, the Jerusalem School has begun preparations for production of the *Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary*, a detailed commentary on the synoptic Gospels which will reflect the insight provided by the School's research. Current research of Jerusalem School members and others is reported in the pages of **JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE**.

The Jerusalem School was registered in Israel as a non-profit research institute in 1985. Its members are Prof. David Flusser, Dr. Robert L. Lindsey, Prof. Shmuel Safrai, David Bivin, Dr. Randall J. Buth, Dr. Weston W. Fields, Dr. R. Steven Notley, Dwight A. Pryor,

Halvor Ronning, Mirja Ronning, Prof. Chana Safrai and Prof. Bradford H. Young.

